

MEMORANDUM

SECRETNATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL
INFORMATION

September 21, 1971

State Dept. review completed

MEMORANDUM FOR:

DR. KISSINGER

THROUGH:

JOHN HOLDRIDGE *John*

FROM:

SVEN KRAEMER *SK*

SUBJECT:

Reactions in South Vietnam Vis-a-Vis
Presidential Election Developments*HK*
SEP 27 1971

The following information is distilled from a large number of cables dealing with reactions in South Vietnam to the October 3 Presidential referendum.

In addition to the newspaper reports, our information points to profound questioning and unrest and to considerable potential for turmoil. Signs such as the following suggest that in South Vietnam the cost of the U.S. not prevailing to change the currently foreseeable election scenario, may be greater than the cost of attempting further pressure on President Thieu for a change in the nature of the referendum or for a postponement of the election.

The Referendum

A September 10 cable from the American Embassy, Saigon points out that current procedures are so rigged that it is obvious to the South Vietnamese that not even a limited referendum can take place. Thus:

-- "We believe that in the absence of elaborate instructions and safeguards, rural voters in particular will be under strong psychological pressures to vote for Thieu. If the voter deposits an empty envelope, he must do something with the ballot. The law provides that a container be placed within the private booth for disposal of unused ballots, but there might be a tendency to overlook this requirement in a one-slotted race, and it is illegal to carry a ballot out of the polling station. Tearing the ballot might make noise audible to polling station officials, and marking the ballot or envelope would require that a pencil or pen be available. It would be difficult to

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persuade large numbers of voters to carry out such procedures. In isolated places many of these procedures are largely forgotten, and voters crowd into the private booths in groups or simply vote in public. Even if privacy is preserved, most rural voters will be worried that local officials will somehow know how they voted and that failure to vote for the Thieu-Huong slate will somehow bring retribution."

The Buddhists

The An Quang Buddhists are for the moment taking a watchful attitude toward the elections with Thich Tri Quang a moderating factor within the hierarchy, but with some susceptibility to Ky's militance and with potential for violence especially in Central Vietnam.

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Communist Intentions

A September 14 cable from the American Embassy, Saigon summarizes the Communists' windfall and their probable political and military exploitation of the election events as follows:

-- "As yet there is little concrete evidence showing how Hanoi and the VC are reacting to recent developments in the GVN Presidential campaign. After covertly pushing the candidacy of General Duong Van Minh to at least some extent, they were perhaps caught off guard by Minh's last minute refusal to run and by Ky's subsequent withdrawal. It can be assumed, however, that they are pleased at the political tensions accompanying Thieu's maneuvers toward a one-man race, which constitute a windfall for them. The damage to the GVN's stature as a constitutional democracy and Thieu's degraded public image serve to justify their past propaganda. The mounting likelihood of civil disturbances gives them an opportunity both to escalate tensions through agitation and to gain converts through proselytizing."

-- Further, "Premier Pham Van Dong in his DRV national day speech on September 2 explicitly called for political agitation within GVN-controlled territory to exploit the election situation."

-- Concerning Communist military actions: "though downplayed, military activity and physically disruptive acts will not be ignored... If major political disruptions occur before or after the election, the Communists might try heavy military attacks to aggravate the situation."

-- In sum: "regardless of their mix of tactics, Hanoi and the VC can be expected to use the propaganda weapon to the hilt, denouncing the October 3 elections as a sham and playing up any disturbances that occur. The campaign will be aimed at both South Vietnam and world public opinion."